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ABSTRACT

There are three reasons to suspect the integrity of research that purports to validate policy decisions in the field of telecommunications: 1) the accuracy of measurement of input and output variables is dubious; 2) the adversary style of decision-making that dominates the field of telecommunications encourages researchers to arrive at only those conclusions which support the arguments of their employers; and 3) much research is openly sponsored by organizations that have a heavy stake in the results. Since policymakers must rely on research findings, it is important that they develop a healthy sense of skepticism and rely only on long-term research efforts. (FMH)

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REMARKS OF ROLAND S. HOMET, JR.

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Introduction. Last year when I spoke to this Conference I was just beginning to develop a coordinated research program at OTP, and I attempted to sketch some processes by which policy research priorities might be defined. This year's Conference finds me going out the well-oiled revolving door at OTP, and at the threshold of opening some new doors with the Aspen Institute. It may be appropriate to share some interim and perhaps intemperate reflections with you.

Theme. If I were to choose a single theme for these reflections -- and the audience for them includes both the policy and the research communities -- it would be this: Beware the illusory blandishments of certainty in policy formulation through contract research.

Problems. More particularly, I am concerned about the proliferating use of quantitative, adversary, and sponsored research to measure the social and economic impacts of both present and future technology and services.

Quantitative research assumes that both dependent and independent variables can in fact be measured and their relationship gauged in a fashion that yields reliable policy insights. I am prepared to accept that this may sometimes be the case, but in most instances of high policy relevance that I have observed the case seems otherwise. What for example will be the effect on residential exchange rates of competition in various selected common carrier service and equipment markets? Quick, some cry, hire a computer and throw in some inputs! But where are we to locate independently verifiable cost and pricing data? What principles of allocation are we to employ in

assigning these data to their relevant markets? What assumptions as to regulatory and legislative actions at the State as well as federal levels is it realistic to adopt? And so on. After nearly a year of hard thought about these questions, we came up with a coordinated and comprehensive four-year study program that we laid before the Congress -- and in the course of doing so we cooled down our ambitions from the attainment of pure Truth and Justice to the realization of a "least worst" scheme from which the public could expect to gain and with which the competing and interested parties could be expected to live.

One other quick example from a different field, and that is the measurement of social effects of broadcast television. I talk to Nick Zapple from time to time, and he complains of the failure of the research community to live up to its unanimous assurance to the Congress -- as he puts it -- that a profile of social effects could and would be produced. Now, was that assurance warranted? Is programming content a commodity like wheat or coal whose properties can be measured on a scale? Or is it perhaps an art form calling for enlightened criticism by people versed in the humanities rather than the social sciences? Taking the point one step further, how does a sex and violence index (or whatever) differ in any fundamental way from the Index deployed during the Spanish Inquisition? And if you have followed my fulminations this far, is not there at least a sense in which the research proposed in this field is both (a) trivial and (b) dangerous?

Hold in your minds for a moment the question of who bears the responsibility for discussing these hard issues realistically with the Congress -- the policy community, the research community, or both. I have spent a little

time on Capitol Hill. I know something about constituent pressures to obtain quick fixes on social problems, and I'm not at all sure Congress is being well served by Pavlovian reactions to the enticements of a special-issue money tree. In short, I suspect Nick Zapple has a valid complaint.

Let me turn to the phenomenon of "adversary science," a contradiction in terms if ever there was one. As a lawyer, I am at home with adversary jurisprudence, in which arguments of policy and precedent are applied to a historical set of fully established facts by opposing parties presenting their cases to a disinterested arbiter. That is not what is understood by the scientific method, which seeks by experimentation to establish causal relationships that illuminate probabilities with respect to future unknown sets of facts. Without rehashing all of C. P. Snow, there is surely a question whether Science -- and I include the economic and social sciences -- is not prostituting its claim on our attentions when it succumbs to the quite different forms and processes of legal argumentation to gain a policy foothold. The recent calls for creation of a Science Tribunal are, I suggest, nothing more than a recognition of this problem which, if adopted, would exacerbate it.

Finally, there is a quite recent entry into the field that warrants our concern, and that is the paradox of sponsored independence. A number of people drew in their breaths when Xerox plunked out a sum of money to buy space in Esquire magazine for Harrison Salisbury. Others said this was no different in principle from Xerox or Gulf or IBM buying goodwill on Public Television, and still others said they were uneasy about that too. The point is that people care about the independence of journalism and of public television, so that even when there is no conflict of interest with respect to specific subject matter they are troubled by the appearances.

Well, do we not care equally about the independence of our social critics? A man or woman toils in the vineyards, publishes findings, and establishes a reputation for fearless judgment, let the chips fall where they may. Then along comes a corporation, or a government agency for that matter, and says "Here's a bundle of money, and if you accept it we will give you access to facts about our operation that nobody has ever seen before and whose details you will have to keep to yourself for proprietary or other confidential reasons. What we want you to do is reach your own fearlessly independent conclusions, and we will see that they are published." I don't need to spin out the tale. It is not fanciful, it is beginning to happen, and I would simply say that if independence is up for sale in that fashion it is also down for extinction.

Very quickly, what can we do to restrain excesses in any of these three directions of quantitative, adversary, and sponsored research? I think the cures have to come primarily from policy makers, who must be brought to recognize their own enlightened self-interest in preventing and reversing further depreciation of the policy-research currency; but that may take some help from the research community itself.

First, there must be a move away from quick-fix investigations and towards more comprehensive and long-term policy research, and this should carry with it greater latitude for the research team or teams to discover and define the constellation of problems embraced within the policy field being examined. OTP, I found, tended to be remiss on both these counts. It typically sought quick answers for Congressional or FCC presentation, and it drew up quite rigid

work statements. The result was that some of the best qualified research people stayed away from us, and some of the better research that was done exposed new problems that a quick-fix policy solution would not remedy. I also found that it was possible -- not easy, but possible -- to change this orientation and to identify at least some major policy research areas in which a different approach should be taken. I left behind some important work in process of this sort -- on problems of cost allocation in the common carrier industry, and of international industry structure -- which I hope will be carried to fruition; perhaps some of you will monitor developments,

Second, we need to instill a skeptical self-discipline in the policy community about the uses and abuses of quantitative research. There is I suppose a Parkinson's law that says that computers must be used up to the limit of their capacity, but surely it does not take much thought to recognize that there are qualitative limits on that capacity. I at least have been driven to turn first to the section of any quantitative research report or proposal that details the assumptions on which it is premised, and all too often I stop there.

Finally, and this is pretty obvious, we should adopt the view that sponsorship inevitably intrudes upon impartiality; and in any case in which the sponsor -- again, corporation or government agency -- has a stake in the subject matter being analyzed, its interest or its policy bias should be made explicit.